DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 572 HE 016 996

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TITLE Student Patterns in Completing General Education Requirements.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bachelors Degrees; Core Curriculum; *Credit Courses; *Degree Requirements; *General Education; Higher Education; *History Instruction; *Humanities; State Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Course Selection

ABSTRACT

Student choices in completing recently initiated general education distribution requirements at a public four-year college were studied in 1982. The bachelor of arts degree requirements consist of two mathematics courses, three natural science courses, three social science courses, three humanities courses, and a two-course Western heritage sequence. The bachelor of science degree requirements are identical, except that no Western heritage courses are required and the three social science courses need not include a sequence. It was found that most of the students completed distribution requirements during their freshman and sophomore years, except that only a third completed the humanities distribution requirements by the junior year. Over 40 percent of those completing the social sciences sequence took two courses in psychology and over half of those completing the humanities sequence took two courses in U.S. history. It appeared that nearly 90 percent of the students were taking two history courses to fulfill general education distribution requirements. It is suggested that the college needs to determine if the strong preference for history courses over other humanities and Western heritage sequences matches the intent of the general education program. (SW)

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STUDENT PATTERNS IN COMPLETING GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

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With the reintroduction of general education distribution requirements in an era of declining resources, it is important to plan and evaluate such requirements carefully. In particular, if any one of several courses may satisfy one distribution requirement, one must consider the impact of student choice when implementing and evaluating the general education plan. Student choice can affect a general education program in three ways.

1. Student preferences can create bottlenecks. If students show a strong preference for just a few courses of the many available, those who are "closed out" of them may wait to enroll in them later rather than choose another course to satisfy the same requirement. If students prefer to put off completing some requirements until their junior and senior years, upper- and lowerclassmen will compete for spaces in the same courses. Both these situations can result in bottlenecks of unfulfilled demand.

Careful planning is essential to averting these problems. Offering too few of the general education courses that students prefer or improperly advising students to delay fulfilling requirements may create bottlenecks of student demand. Offering too many general education courses, however, means that precious faculty resources will be needlessly taken away from more advanced courses. Such planning cannot be done, however, without information on which general education courses students elect and when they take them.

2. Student preferences can create student frustration. In an era of

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declining enrollment, it is also increasingly important that student progress through degree programs be monitored carefully, so that student difficulties, dissatisfaction, frustration, and possible attrition are all kept to a minimum. Planning can relieve student frustration by initiating a clearer explanation of the rationale of such programs, by clarifying appropriate and inappropriate course choices, and by planning course offerings to relieve bottlenecks. Again, however, it requires information on patterns in completing general education distribution requirements.

3. Student preferences can create actual course patterns quite different from the intent of the general education program. If most students, for example, fulfill a science distribution requirement by taking only biology courses, one must question the success of the requirement in exposing most students to the sciences. Student preferences can also prevent students from benefitting from the planned general-to-specific flow of their college program.

Collecting information on patterns in student choice can help curriculum planners revise general education distribution requirements so student experiences better match the intent of the program.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the study was to determine student choices in completing recently initiated general education distribution requirements at a public four-year college. The requirements for students in B.A. degree programs consist of two mathematics courses, three natural science courses, three social science courses (including a two-course "sequence"), three humanities courses (including a two-course sequence) and a two-course Western heritage sequence. The requirements for students in B.S. degree programs are identical except that no Western heritage courses are required and the three social science courses need not include a sequence.

The study had two specific objectives: (1) to determine which general education requirements students choose to complete during their freshman and sophomore years and (2) to identify the specific courses students choose to complete the three required sequences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

More and more colleges today are reintroducing general education distribution requirements (Gros-Louis, 1981). Indeed, according to Kramer (1981), 95% of the nation's colleges have general education distribution requirements. Distribution requirements usually entail "a core of courses--usually a predictable cluster of five or six requirements" (O'Banion & Shaw, 1982, p. 69), chosen from single-discipline, subject-centered courses (Hammons, Thomas, & Ward, 1980).

Gaff (1980), has noted that distribution requirements must be carefully implemented and evaluated. He observes that general education programs can involve substantial reallocations of resources and suggests than an initial general education program be considered only a trial run.

There has been little mention in the literature, however, of the need to consider the impact of student choice in evaluating distribution requirements. Vars (1982) in fact feels that an advantage of the distribution-requirements approach to general education is that such requirements utilize existing courses and permit scheduling to be accomplished in the "usual manner" (p. 218). He apparently assumes that the imposition of general education distribution requirements will have no impact on course enrollments--the assumption this paper challenges.

The problem of student choice is addressed by Smith and Clarke (1980) in the context of student-designed majors. They note that such programs can disrupt a college's system of resource allocation and reduce the accuracy of

planning procedures that try to predict student flow. It seems likely that distribution requirements, which are also driven by student choice, would encounter the same planning difficulties.

METHOD

The Permanent Record Cards of a random sample of 129 Fall, 1982, juniors who entered this college as freshmen (with six or fewer transfer hours) were studied. Since course choices could vary substantially by major, the sample was stratified accordingly.

For each student in the sample, we identified which general education courses were completing during the freshman and sophomore years. The principal data analysis consisted of describing the percent of students in the sample completing each distribution requirement. Since a review of the data indicated differences among five cohorts of student majors--Communication Studies majors, Business majors, Education majors, students with other majors, and students without a declared major--the second analysis was a description of the percents of students within each cohort completing each requirement. The final data analysis consisted of describing the percents of students choosing various course sequences. A 95% confidence-level error margin was calculated for each sample percent.

RESULTS

Most of the sample completed most distribution requirements during their freshman and sophomore years (Table 1). The main exception: only a third of our sample completed the humanities distribution requirements. Within cohorts, there were additional requirements that many students were not completing in a timely fashion. Only a third of the Business majors had completed the natural sciences distribution requirement, less than half of the Education majors had taken the second mathematics course, and less than half the undeclared majors

Table 1

General Education Requirements Completed by the End of the Sophomore Year

Requirement completed	Major: Comm. Studies f	%	Business Admin. f	%	Education f	%	All other f	%	Undeclared f	%	Total sample f	%
Math I	23	92%	16	84%	30	94%	31	89%	16	89%	116	90%
Math II	18	72%	19	100%	18	56%	29	83%	17	94%	101	78%
Western heritage:												
No courses completed	5	20%	n/a		n/a		9	26%	10	56%	n/a	
Only 1 course compltd.	1	4%	n/a		n/a		7	20%	1	6%	n/a	
Complete req. compltd.	19*	76%	n/a		n/a		19	54%	7*	39%	n/a	
Humanities:												
No courses completed	0	0%	3	16%	1	3%	2	6%	1	6%	7	5%
Only 1 course compltd.	4	16%	3	16%	12	38%	7	20%	3	17%	29	22%
Only 2 courses compltd.	12	48%	7	37%	8	25%	16	46%	8	44%	51	40%
2-crse seq. compltd.	11*	44%	9	47%	12	38%	14*	40%	7	39%	53	41%
Complete req. compltd.	9	36%	6	32%	11	35%	10	29%	6	33%	42	33%
Social sciences:												
No courses completed	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Only 1 course compltd.	1	4%	0	0%	2	6%	2	6%	0	0%	5	4%
Only 2 courses compltd.	5	20%	0	0%	8	25%	5	14%	6	33%	24	19%
2-crse seq. compltd.	20	80%	n/a		n/a		30	86%	12	67%	n/a	
Complete req. compltd.	19	76%	19	100%	22	69%	28	80%	12	67%	100	78%
Natural sciences:												
No courses completed	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Only 1 course compltd.	2	8%	4	21%	7	22%	2	6%	1	6%	16	12%
Only 2 courses compltd.	8	32%	9	47%	13	41%	8	23%	4	22%	42	33%
Complete req. compltd.	15	60%	6	32%	12	38%	25	71%	13	72%	71	55%
All requirements	2	8%	2	11%	7	22%	3	9%	1	6%	15	12%
Sample size	25	100%	19	100%	32	100%	35	100%	18	100%	129	100%
Error margin no more than	±20%		±22%		±17%		±17%		±24%		± 4%	

*Some of these students (3 Comm. Studies, 1 undeclared, and 1 other) completed history courses for the humanities sequence and the Western heritage sequence, even though taking two sequences in one department is not permitted.

had begun the Western heritage sequence.

Students had definite preferences for courses to complete the sequence requirements (Table 2). Over 40% of those completing the social sciences sequence took two courses in psychology and over half of those completing the humanities sequence took two courses in U. S. history. Since an additional third of the sample completed the Western heritage sequence by taking two Western heritage courses offered by the history department, it appears that nearly 90% of our students are taking two history courses to fulfill general education distribution requirements.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to be descriptive and not to determine why students made the choices they did. Further study is needed to determine why many students did not complete the humanities requirements and why certain cohorts did not complete other requirements. Discussion within the college community is also needed to determine if the strong preference for history courses over other humanities and Western heritage sequences matches the intent of the general-education program.

The results of this study demonstrate the need to consider the impact of student choice when implementing and evaluating a general education program. Student choices can create bottlenecks even though plenty of courses may be available, can keep students from benefitting from a general-to-specific flow in their college programs, and can permit students to fulfill general education distribution requirements with course patterns different from those intended by the program.

This study also provides a baseline of data against which other colleges might compare themselves. It would be interesting to know, for example, if there is a similar strong preference for history courses at other schools and

Table 2

General Education Sequences Most Frequently Completed

Sequence	Number of students completing f	%
Western heritage:	(50)	(100%)
HIST 230-231 (Western Heritage)	19*	38%
ENG 210-211 (Literature)	13	26%
TH 260-261 (History of Western Theatre)	7	14%
ART 250-251 (Survey of Art)	6	12%
PHIL 235-236 (History of Philosophy)	5	10%
Humanities:	(54)	(100%)
HIST 102-103 (History of the U. S.)	30*	56%
ELED 106-107 (Public School in American Life)	5	9%
Two courses in French	4	7%
Two courses in Spanish	4	7%
All other combinations (no more than one person in each)	11	20%
Social sciences:	(87)	(100%)
PSYC 100-200 (Human Behavior/Life-Span Devel. Psych.)	37	43%
SOC 100-250 (Intro. Sociology/Structure of Amer. Society)	20	23%
ECON 100-101 (Macroeconomics/Microeconomics)	16	18%
ANTH 100-250 (General Anthropology/Comparative Societies)	4	5%
PS 100-105 (Intro Poli. Sci./ Amer. Politics and Govt.)	4	5%
ANTH 100-280 (General Anthropology/Human Evolution)	3	3%
PS 100-109 (Intro. Poli. Sci./International Politics)	3	3%

*Some of these students (3 Comm. Studies, 1 undeclared, and 1 other) completed history courses for the humanities sequence and the Western heritage sequence, even though taking two sequences in one department is not permitted.

if other Business majors put off natural science courses.

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